

## Ancient Hopes and Fragile Dreams

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Summary: Jake kills Tom accidently in a horrible battle and falls into depression.

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\_ War is the futile pursuit for peace \_

#### Part One

Dead. He was dead. My hopes, dreams, and reasons for fighting, gone. Killed by his brother's hand, by my hand. I thought up excuses why it was not my fault. I was just letting in to the tiger, it happened too fast, I couldn't see in the dark until it was too late. But in making up excuses, I reprimanded myself for creating the lies that they were. The others controlled their morphs, why couldn't I, mine? I should have used the tiger's acute sight and hearing to recognize the face and voice I had known for so long, loved for so long. Tom.

At the thought of his name I burst into tears, burying my face in the pillows on my bed. I cried myself to sleep. And even in my dreams I saw his face and, I cried. I woke up the next morning convinced that Tom wasn't dead. It was someone else who had mauled by the tiger's ferocious teeth and claws. Someone else. Someone else. In the end, I believed myself.

That is, until the afternoon rolled around and we were called into the hospital to identify a body. I desperately thought, "No. No. Tom isn't dead. It was someone else who collapsed on the cold floor. Someone else, whose face and body were scratched by the tiger's claws. Someone else I...I killed." The identification was positive.

When we got home I asked my parents if I could go outside. I needed to clear my head. They were hesitant, but let me go.

I just kinda walked around for a while, not thinking anything at all. I felt like I would burst. Someone needed to know. Marco or Cassie or Rachel or Tobias or even Ax. I needed to be comforted. I, Jake, the "Fearless Leader," needed to be reassured it would be all right.

Cassie was the closest. I started out walking, but in a few minutes I was running like my life depended on it. My side ached and I was gasping for breath but still I ran. I ran, panting, to the barn where Cassie would most likely be. "Hi Jake." The sound of her voice comforted me a little. She saw my face, my eyes, red from so many tears. "Jake, what's wrong?"

I froze. "Cassie, I..." That's all I managed to get out. My body jerked forward violently. All the emotions I had locked up, sadness, grief, anger, and most strongly guilt burst through in bitter tears. This time I collapsed on the ground.

"Shh. Shh. It's okay, Jake. It's okay. What happened? What's wrong?" Cassie comforted me, as I knew she would.

I just drifted off for a moment as I lay there on the floor of the barn, my head in Cassie's lap. She stroked my hair and forehead as my mother did when I was little. I wept the remaining tears.

I took a few deep breaths to calm myself then I told Cassie the reason I had come. "Cassie, Tom...Tom's...dead. We got called into the hospital a few hours ago to identify a body and it was him. He's dead! My brother is dead!" I took a few more deep breaths. I had started out talking normally, but towards the end my words were racing.

"Do you know how he died?" Cassie bit her lip thinking what I already knew.

I shook my head. "They are running some tests to determine the cause of death," I answered not willing to lie to Cassie. But I was not quite ready to tell the whole truth either.

"I know how hard this is, and I know nothing I can do will be able to totally console you. But is there anything I can do to ease your pain?" I thought for a moment. "Yes," I finally answered. "Yes, there is."

"What?"

"Call the others. Tell them to come here."

Cassie looked uncertain, but went inside to call Rachel and Marco. She told Marco to get Tobias and Ax.

Part 2

Rachel walked into the barn. Her eyes looked hollow and away from life. Probably a lot like mine looked. "Hi Cassie." She hesitated a little. "Hi Jake."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Um, Jake? Does Cassie know? I mean if she doesn't I won't tell her. That is, if you don't want me to..." Rachel said. It creeped me out a bit. Rachel never had seemed weak or afraid before. And now, after all the death she had seen, this time Rachel allowed her weaker side to overcome her strong one.

"She knows," I said simply. I was afraid that if I spoke more, the liquid fire would pour down my cheeks once more.

Now, Rachel isn't a hug person, but then, at that moment of sadness, she reached out her arms and pulled me close. Rachel knew that she would now be like the sibling I would no longer have.

"Does Marco know?" Rachel asked.

< Does Marco know what? > An osprey suddenly flew into the barn and started to demorph into Marco.

"Never mind," I said quickly.

"Where are Tobias and Ax? I told you to bring them," Cassie asked.

"Tobias decided to wait for Ax to go bird. They should be here in a few seconds."

"Okay, we'll wait for Tobias and Ax and then--"

< No need. We're here.>

< Hello Prince Jake. Cassie. Rachel. Why do you request my presence here?> There was a murmur of agreement.

I sighed. They would find out anyway. And not only that, I needed my friends to know about the death of my brother. "The first thing I need to say, is something Rachel and Cassie already know. This afternoon my parents and I were called into the hospital to identify the body on my brother, Tom. They do not know yet how he died."

I looked up for the first time. All three of them were looking away. The news had hit close to home for Ax, Tobias, and Marco. They had all been through similar situations. I felt my eyes and cheeks burn up. But no. No. I couldn't cry. Not in front of everyone. I was the leader. I had to be strong. I had to be. I had to be.

Marco's voice penetrated my thoughts. "Jake, sit down."

I shook my head. "No." I had to be strong.

< Jake, you look like you're going to faint.> Tobias this time. He was right. I felt like I was going to faint. Still, I shook my head.

"Jake, you said that there were two things. If talking about this makes you feel uncomfortable, do you want to talk about the other thing?" Cassie knew me all too well. She saw through the mask I had built, and recognized my discomfort. The only thing she didn't know was that the second thing was going to build much more discomfort than the first.

I took up Marco's offer to sit down on a stool. There was a minute of disturbing silence as I thought of a way to explain what I wanted to do, but could not bring myself to say. I finally broke the quiet. "We did well on the last mission, and we have hurt the Yeerks very badly just as Elfangor wanted."

"But..." Rachel asked almost sarcastically.

I held my breath before blurting it out. "But you're going to have to find yourselves a new leader."

"What?"

< Huh?>

"Say what?"

"Why?"

< Prince Jake, I do not understand.>

"No more," I said. "Never again. I don't care what you say. I not fighting anymore." I was afraid to look at my friend's hurt faces. Cassie and Marco had both "quit" before. Both times, the other's reactions were scornful.

I felt Marco's hand on my shoulder. "Jake, I've been there. I know how hard it is. But you can't just stop your life and give up just because somebody dies. You miss them. You cry yourself to sleep every night. But the one thing you don't do, is start living in a bubble just because you're mourning." I was surprised it was Marco who said that. He isn't one to be all serious and solemn. Of course, he has been in a similar situation and felt, as my best friend, like it was his job to reassure me. Everyone looked as surprised as I was at Marco's speech. But Rachel looked more concerned for me.

"Jake, there's one thing I don't get. It was probably the Yeerk's fault that Tom got killed. I don't see why you wouldn't want revenge. To destroy the invasion and Visser Three for what they did to your family, to our family. I know that's the way I feel." She was strong Rachel again. If only things had turned out different. If only she knew who killed Tom. If only she knew how he died. If only...

Tobias, Marco, and Ax obviously agreed with her. In fact, that was probably the reason they all still fought in this nightmarish war. Even Cassie seemed to wonder; though she would not ever fight for revenge.

< Jake are you sure you don't know how Tom died?> Tobias asked. He emphasized the "you." I guess he had noticed how I kept saying "them" when I said I didn't know how he died. That was when I realized that I had to tell the whole truth. I couldn't lie to my friends anymore. Not only that, Rachel deserved to know how her cousin died.

"You guys, I have been lying when I said I didn't know how Tom got killed. Well, not exactly lying, but not telling the whole truth. It's true that the hospital does not know yet how Tom died, but I do," I said quickly. The rest was spoken in a tight, strangled voice.

"Tom's body was cut up and mauled by a tiger. By...by my tiger, my morph."

A long silence.

"Didn't you hear me? I killed Tom. I murdered my own brother."

Another long silence followed by, surprisingly enough, Ax's thought speak. < Prince Jake, is it not true that Tom would have killed you, had you not killed him first? Did he not have a Dracon Beam?>

"Yeah, but..."

< Jake, I think what Ax is trying to say is, that you really had no choice. Tom, no, the Yeerk, would have killed you.>

"I realize that, but it's still...I can't. I just can't anymore. I...I'm sorry. The funeral's on Sunday, tomorrow." I looked up just in time to see everyone leave except for Cassie. I lowered my head to the ground. I couldn't stand to see my friends in such pain. No, they were more than friends. They had each saved my life more than once, and now I was deserting them.

I gave Cassie a faint "good bye" and then left the barn and started to walk home. My stomach was in knots by the time I reached my house. I mumbled to my parents that I didn't feel well and would be going to bed without dinner. After spending what seemed like hours staring at the same spot on the ceiling and wondering over and over again in my head "why," I finally fell asleep.

And in my sleep I dreamed

I saw Tom, but he was free. I reached out for him, and he embraced me back. "Hey midget," he said. "How's it going?"

I started to answer, but something hit me. Hard. Tom didn't seem mad. Not even close. I asked why. "Tom, don't you remember? I killed you. I-" "No Jake, you didn't kill me. You killed the Yeerk. You freed me. See I have a soul. And that soul will keep me alive and aware, even though my body is gone. The Yeerk, however, his soul was destroyed by his mercilessness and his will to enslave. I thank you Jake. I will forever love you. Remember that. Always remember."

He started to fade away from my consciousness. "Wait!" I cried.

"Yes." "What about my soul? I have done so much killing and so much...so much...just so much. What about me? Will our souls ever meet again?"

"That you must decide for yourself, Jake. Good bye. I love you forever."

"Good bye, Tom," I said quickly, and he was gone.

Part 3

My eyes snapped open. I was breathing in deep, ragged breaths. Sweat was covering my body. I was shaking. I was so tired. I just wanted to curl up again and just fall asleep, and never wake up. But my buzzing

mind would not allow it. I finally climbed out of bed.

I hobbled sleepily over to the bathroom. The covered mirror reminded me of Tom. Not looking in a mirror this week would be just one of the signs for my mourning family. I took a quick shower and went downstairs in my bathrobe. My mom and dad were there. I suddenly didn't feel like eating anymore. My parent's eyes looked so, I don't know, so empty.

I walked upstairs again to get dressed. We were meeting Rabbi Bernstein at ten. I picked up the small silver necklace that was sitting on my bed-stand. It was a little Jewish star. Grandpa had given Tom and me identical ones about five years ago. I put it on and my eyes began to tear again.

The funeral went by slowly. By the end my cheeks were stained with tears. But it was for a different reason than everyone else. See I knew who killed my brother, and I hated him at that moment. I hated him, myself, with so much hatred that if anyone knew I would be thrown in an insane asylum.

Each family member shoveled three scoops of dirt onto the grave. Only after everyone started leaving did I realize that none of my friends had talked, or even looked at me since I announced I wouldn't fight anymore. I didn't know if they hated me, or pitied me, or what.

My parents told me it was time to go. I said I wanted to stay around awhile. I guess it was because of the combination of emotions flooding my mind. The hard feelings of grief, emptiness, and, worst of all, guilt. I just stood there looking at the tombstone, reading it over and over.

I don't know how long it was until I realized that Cassie was looking at me. She was wearing her "pity look." I glanced back over at her. She looked like she was pondering over whether she would turn me away like the others, or try to persuade me back.

Cassie noticed that I was looking at her and she glanced away quickly. I walked over to her. "Cassie-

"No. Don't say anything. Just listen. I can't see why you are quitting. You are leaving all of us. I can understand that you are upset and angry at yourself, but in giving up, you'll just make yourself feel worse. Everyone looks to you like a leader. You want to know what Tobias told me. He told me that Ax asked him what was going on. When Tobias explained what happened, Ax went nuts. He said that he will no longer call you his "Prince" and that he thought you were stronger. But Ax isn't the only one. We all had more faith in you. We all thought you were stronger. Now you have destroyed the name you created for yourself," Cassie spat out. I was surprised, to say the least. I had never seen her this angry. Cassie rarely yells, and when she yells a lot, it just scares me.

"Cassie I'm sorry. But I just can't anymore. You understand, don't you?"

"Jake, there is a saying I heard once. 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me?' That means that if you don't try to protect yourself from the Yeerks, no one will. You are your own last hope."

"So? I know who some Controllers are. And I know not to join the Sharing. To protect myself doesn't mean to have to be an Animorph again," I replied hotly.

Cassie sighed. "Jake, there is another part to the saying. 'If I am not for others, what am I?' If you do not stand up for everyone else on planet Earth when we are the only ones who can fight, what have you become? What kind of creature is it that will not save it's home? That creature is obviously not human."

I started nudging the ground at my feet. I didn't know what to say at that powerful statement.

"Jake, I'm going to morph osprey to get home. It's pretty far away from here to my house. Good-bye, unless you want to go flying with me?"

I stared at Cassie. She was a remarkable girl. She had found a way to give me a way out. To take back everything I said. To become a leader again. To be "Prince Jake" again. "I want to just stay here for a while longer, Cassie. I'll see you around."

Cassie had kicked off her outer clothes and was already almost fully osprey. < You too Jake,> she sighed again. Cassie took off. And with that, she was gone.

I thought about what Cassie said. Maybe I should go back after all. No. I forced the thought from my head. I had made up my mind. Never again. But then Tom's words came back. "You didn't kill me. You killed the Yeerk." "You must decide for yourself." "I will forever love you. Remember that. Always remember."

God, the only person that hates me because of what I did is me. That's when it hit me. REALLY hit me. I had to free others. I had to renew hope. That was what my role was. What my role is.

I morphed peregrine falcon and opened my wings.

\*Author's note: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I? And if not now, when?" was first said by Rabbi Hillel. It is also in the book of Pirkey Avot (The Teachings of our Sages.)

End  
file.